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## ABSTRACT

A review of literature in sociolinguistics and classroom conversation reveals areas in which sociolinguistic research and theory can inform the conducting of student writing conferences with teachers. Studies on classroom discourse, communicative competence in classroom exchanges, the nature and role of teacher talk, and the features of communication in writing conferences are explored. It is concluded that the writing conference is a private dyad within a larger speech community, made up of teacher and student sharing, and is a natural, necessary, and productive supplement to classroom teaching. It can be a nurturing, productive, confidence-building, and even fun experience if treated as an open-ended communicative event in which the teacher asks questions, waits patiently for answers, provides verbal nudges, and probes rather than tests the student. More classroom research is needed, ideally initiated by teacher-ethnographers. (Contains 33 references.) (MSE)

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# Telling Teacher Talk: Sociolinguistic Features of Writing Conferences

## Abstract

Many writing instructors and language arts teachers have incorporated writing conferences into the classroom feedback structure. These conferences could be examined from a new perspective by looking at what teachers do, and by critiquing how teachers talk about writing in the conference. Current findings in sociolinguistics could inform our classroom practices and increase our awareness and understanding of the impact of teacher talk.

## Background and Rationale

Although sociolinguistics may be considered a relatively young field within the area of linguistics and language study, wise moves were made early on. Researchers recognized the value of schools and classrooms as rich sites for collecting language samples. The varied activities in schools also contributed to the widening interests of sociolinguists in terms of psychology and anthropology. At a time when these several social science-based research approaches were converging to broaden and strengthen the field of sociolinguistics, schools and classrooms provided ideal living laboratories, places where language interactions could be viewed in context (Florio-Ruane, 1987). Penalosa (1981) defines this approach as the "systematic description of communicative behavior as culturally standardized . . . viewed in the sociocultural context in which it occurs" (p. 68).

The basic theory of inquiry for sociolinguistic work is grounded in evaluating interaction, as described by Gumperz (1982):

Sociolinguistic paradigms . . . isolate particular features of language use and seek to demonstrate that these a) correlate with extralinguistically determined categories such as sex, age, social status or discourse context and b) are in some sense stigmatized or pejoratively evaluated when they continue to be employed. Such sociolinguistic factors affect individuals' ability to be heard and be listened to in public life. (p.27)

Sociolinguists have found a multitude of study foci available in the classroom; almost all dimensions of human behavior, language use, and interaction are dynamically replicated there, as evidenced in studies of language variations, language and access issues, language and gender issues, second-language learning, African-American Vernacular English or Ebonics and dialectal differences, language attitude, and of course, classroom discourse.

One key relationship, the one between the developmental writing classroom and the current sociolinguistic research, can certainly afford to be strengthened by an astute awareness of sociolinguistic features as they appear in classrooms. Even with a significant increase in the number of classroom ethnographies which employ discourse analysis or look at language usage and communicative structures, are teachers possibly continuing to work in ways that may not be promoting student's growth in language use? Perhaps recognizing sociolinguistic features can bring about real change in teachers who take the time to understand the implications of how

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we talk with student writers. I believe sociolinguistics can tell us about ourselves as teachers of developmental writing, and specifically about what we do in writing conferences.

Our academically underprepared students in developmental courses are especially impacted by the hierarchical shape that most school interactions take. We can not deny that several landmark sociolinguistic investigations have already exposed our "power" positions as teachers, and how our relationships with students' language and our arrogations regarding their home culture can impede learning. Black (1993) has recognized that most composition theorists and teachers have assumed that a strong movement toward face-to-face conferencing held the promise of unproblematic equality, yet, she found that "power relations play a significant role in the structure of the conference and that larger social structures [class, language difference, race, gender] which disadvantage particular groups of people are reconstructed and reinforced in the structure of the conference." (pp.2557)

### Sociolinguistic Research in Classrooms

When sociolinguists examine the language of classrooms, they attempt to design a framework in which to describe various language use events. First, the school itself is generally agreed to be considered a speech community (Hymes, 1974) and, according to Gumperz (1982), "the speech community must form the starting point of linguistic analysis ... [and is] defined as a system of organized diversity held together by common norms and aspirations" (p. 24). If the whole scope of school language use constitutes a speech community, speech events then are embedded in each teacher and student meeting. According to Kutz and Roskelly, (1991), "the typical class can be seen as a speech event, a large unit of discourse ... a genre of speech activity [with] its own structure and roles and rules (both spoken and unspoken)" (p. 73).

We know that the speech community is one replete with "not only rules, but also sometimes oppression, sometimes freedom, in the relation between personal abilities and their occasions of use" (Hymes, 1974, p. 205). Working within any speech community then implies that problematical events and issues are inherent in language use. Hymes confirms this by recognizing the classroom speech "community as an organization of diversity" (Cazden, 1992, p. 198). Bakhtin takes this even further, stating that the school/classroom speech community exhibits "more conflict than coexistence" (qtd. in Cazden p. 198).

Next, the focus of sociolinguistic research is on its particular communicative device, discourse; discourse can be evaluated for effectiveness in developing *communicative competence*. This term describes not only a speaker or student's demonstration of acquired language and language code, stemming from a linguistic competence, but is directly related to speaker or student's success in the negotiation of cultural contexts (Saville-Troike, 1984). In other words, what many of us sense is a tacit knowledge of appropriate language use and appropriate languaging behaviors in social settings is truly an acquired repertoire of skills that has the power to "mark" speakers and students. And, because "[p]roblems arise when individual competence is judged in relation to a presumed ideal speech community ... unequal or inappropriate educational treatment" could result (Saville-Troike, p. 27). Providing students with a variety of language use experiences fosters and broadens communicative competence. It is, therefore, imperative for teachers of developmental writing to understand the value inherent in dialogic opportunities such as writing conferences in order to utilize the communicative competence- building qualities of these conferences.

Since classroom discourse can take on many forms, several types of analyses have been employed to look at the range of classroom exchanges. Fasold (1990) explains that "discourse studies on interactive events concern problems and successes people have using language in their interactions ... [in other words, how they] ... manage their discourse with respect to their cultural backgrounds and their interactive goals at the time of talk" (p. 65). Discourse analysis is a "linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written

discourse ... i.e. conversational exchanges and written texts" (Stubbs, 1983, p. 81). Both conversational exchanges and written texts, requisite parts of the writing conference, have been examined by sociolinguists through discourse analysis.

We know from our own schooling and our own teaching practices that teacher-talk is a fundamental component of classrooms, with some studies claiming three of five hours daily are filled with "chalk talk" (Krogness, 1995). The overt function of teacher-talk is to monitor and control through several forms of metacommunication, what Stubbs (1983) describes as talk about what teacher just said, and includes attracting students' attention, controlling their amount of speech, confirming understanding, repeating directions, and correcting. This metacommunication often dominates classrooms, leaving little time for more productive socio-cognitive activity; one estimate claims that for 70% of all classroom time someone is talking, and for 70% of this talking time, teacher is talking (Stubbs). Furthermore, "most teacher-talk can be described as 'telling'" (Edwards & Furlong, 1978, p. 23). Research specifically on teacher-student discourse with respect to level and success of interaction has revealed that "most often teacher's own talk is intended to control interjection and behavior rather than to communicate directly about a subject" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 73). Critical then to creating more opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities is the need for more metalinguage: talk about language, i.e. conversation about reading and writing. Stubbs (1983) and others have recognized that the constructs of classrooms, although social in nature, are "asymmetrical." In other words, students and teachers are complicit in their tacit knowledge of what teacher-talk does and, more pointedly, who "does" teacher-talk: students don't "do" teacher-talk. An imbalance of power undergirds all classroom activity.

What we know about socially constructed knowledge tells us that the signals sent through such hierarchical relationships can impede learning. Fairclough (1989) recognizes that any "unequal" discourse event "exercises controls and constraints on non-powerful participants" (p. 46). This is compounded when we understand that as language is acquired within any social structure, (schools in this case), learners simultaneously "internalize social reality" (Penalosa, 1981, p. 42). If students then learn not to trust their talk, what happens in dyads such as writing conferences is impacted by the limitations we have placed on students' opportunities for learning through talk. If we suddenly ask students to perform in writing conferences in ways that contradict the typical classroom discourse rules and roles, can we expect productive conferences? And, if there are some positive features of teacher-talk, and students assimilated these features, would this enhance their abilities to guide their own learning? Could appropriation of the language of monitoring and control contribute to student empowerment and be carried successfully into the writing conference setting? As John and Goldstein point out, we "develop and test our ideas about meaning and form chiefly through verbal interaction with more verbally mature speakers" (qtd. in Gere, 1987, p. 82). It is my sense that the pervasive teacher-dominated scenario could afford to shift somewhat, that the atypical could occur, when writing conferences begin, student-talk could begin.

In a transactional model of teaching, in contrast to a transmission model of teaching, goals for cognitive development rest on assumptions of assimilated learning. Levinson and others strongly urge that we recognize the developmental power of conversation, "the form of language that everyone is first exposed to and hence the 'matrix' for language acquisition" (qtd. in Sperling, 1992, p. 3). Vygotsky (1978) asserts that "[t]he transformation of an interpersonal process to an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events" (p. 57). Educators and parents recognize that this movement *outward*, this prosocial behavior, signifies growth. Of the many social activities necessary to trigger this movement, the foremost is productive talk. "To approach knowing through dialogue is to acknowledge that making meaning is a transactional process" (Peterson, 1992, p. 110).

This is where the sociolinguist comes in Gumperz (1982) explains that "to understand the role of language in education ... we need to begin with a closer understanding of how

linguistic signs interact with social knowledge in discourse" (p. 29). Therefore, the intent of sociolinguists is not simply to appraise how language may serve curricular goals in the reified activity of classrooms, but to see in which ways "speech unites the cognitive and the social" (Barnes, qtd. in Cazden, 1988, p. 2). Sociolinguists attempt to uncover the patterns that run beneath our teacher-talk and their findings help to move us toward using language and inviting language that promotes discovery and growth.

Sociolinguists have examined the verbal interactions between individuals and have been able to map out distinguishable features of this interaction. Cazden (1988) defines a speech event as a verbal interaction that is "recurring, bounded, with a clear beginning and end, [and] with consistent rules for participation" (p. 8). Conversation has been variously defined by sociolinguists, but Trudgill (1983) recognizes that the features are "structured, rule-governed, non-random sequences of utterances" (p. 128). Are writing conferences speech events, conversations, both, neither?

Composition theorists and researchers define a writing conference as a teacher-student dyad designed to facilitate learning; they consider the focus on and the primacy of "talk," "dialogue" or "conversation" within such encounters to be its distinguishing feature from any other mode of instruction (Flynn, 1993, p. 10). The three terms, *talk*, *dialogue* and *conversation*, are here used interchangeably and always represent the key element of the conference.

#### Implications Based on Research

If we acknowledge that patterns of interaction exist in classrooms and if we also acknowledge that some aspects of these patterns can be problematical, working at cross-purposes to the goals of socially-constructed learning, then we need to look closely at the features found in writing conferences. We may find that some features, carried over from classroom discourse, will not be productive. And we may find that some strategies can contribute greatly to the writing conference dynamic and ultimately to communicative competence.

Cazden (1992), Hymes (1974), and others have sketched out the typical patterns of classroom discourse in sociolinguistic terms. The most prominent pattern found in classrooms, identified by Cazden and others, is configured by a Teacher Initiation (I), a Student Response (R), and a Teacher Evaluation (E). This IRE pattern, or act sequence, as Hymes calls it, is recapitulated in writing conferences, with varying degrees of intent and formal structure.

A key component of the IRE pattern is the teacher-initiate question. And, unfortunately, "[t]eachers most commonly ask questions to test knowledge rather than to gain information on the ostensible topic" (Saville-Troike, 1984, p. 242). If this pattern is prevalent in classrooms, students have no reason to believe that even those questions posed during writing conferences have any other purpose but to test. Most of us might be working under the assumption that our questioning strategies, via the Socratic method, lead to the most productive discourse with students. But again, as both Fletcher (1993) and Saville-Troike (1984) remind us, too many questions (number), or questions too removed from what the student deems meaningful (type), can move students to passivity, immobilizing rather than stimulating them. When a teacher or a tutor loses sight of student-defined goals, a "disparity between [teacher] ideals and [teacher] practice . . ." occurs (Fletcher, p. 42). Johnson (1993) identified three aspects of conference questioning as problematic: "First, the person asking the questions controls the direction of the inquiry, . . . second, questions imposed by a teacher may derail student's train of thought . . . Finally, most teachers do not give students as much time as they need to respond fully to questions" (p. 34). It seems even well-intentioned questioning could have a detrimental effect.

Studies of wait-time, the period of time between teacher's question and student's

response, tell us that a strong correlation exists between an extended length of wait-time and the quality of the writing conference. Johnson (1993) cites a report by Rowe (1973) which concluded that when teachers consciously allowed more wait-time several positive events followed:

[T]he length of response increased; unsolicited but appropriate responses increased; the failure to respond decreased; confidence, as reflected in response, increased; speculative responses increased; evidence inferences increased; student questions increased; and responses from students rated as slow increased. (p. 38)

Often we engage in a "no-gap overlap" sequence as speakers who are uncomfortable with silences ourselves, forgetting that students from various cultures or those with non-mainstream experiences measure and demonstrate learning in different ways.

The Bellack system, developed in 1966, looks at pedagogical "moves," and describes yet another classroom discourse pattern. MacDonald, (1982) describes these "moves" as structuring, soliciting, responding and reacting. In studies which followed the "moves" — much like a chess game is recorded — teachers made the most structuring moves, usually by initiating topics. Teachers did not, surprisingly, ask the most questions, which seems highly likely, but the students responded more when asked direct questions, which are solicitation moves. Students responded more when asked direct questions, which are solicitation moves. Category of reacting, defined as "comments the speaker makes unsolicited," was almost evenly distributed (MacDonald, p. 8). One explanation was offered: "It is not uncommon for a teacher to comment on a student's response to a question, whereas it is less likely that students would comment on the remarks of a teacher" (p. 12). This could imply that more dynamic exchanges occurred when both students and teacher "shared responsibility for participation" and when the student side of participation was more "self-initiated than teacher solicited" (p. 12). We see here too that when students are encouraged to discuss, they generally follow implicit rules of classroom discourse: students don't do teacher talk.

In a study that focused on the perceptions of students regarding their teacher's verbal responses, positive feedback was the feature most connected with high teacher ratings (Morine-Dershimer et al., 1980). Highly rated teachers engaged most in a cyclical, repetitive feedback loop (a say-back style of reiterating and valuing all student responses), did not overuse praise, and maintained a "conversational style" even during regular classroom discourse (p. 83). The researchers also found that a natural and productive questioning cycle developed as a result of this technique. The important implication stemming from the data revealed that "an interactive relationship exists among [students'] status in the social setting, [students'] participation in social discourse in that setting, and the [students'] interpretation of the meaning of that social discourse" (Morine-Dershimer et al., p. 95). Clearly we need to be aware of how our teacher-talk is perceived and evaluated by students.

Because teacher dominance in the classroom can be measured by observing how much of the communicative "work" is being done by them, some sociolinguists have focused on observing who does the communicative "work" in writing conferences (Edwards & Furlong, 1978, p. 18). Freedman (1982) looked at the writing conferences of both "strong" and "weak" writers to determine which teacher-initiated activity was most productive. The linguistic analysis tool she developed centered on measuring "idea units" that revealed semantic content. In this way, she traced the course of the conference and identified areas of verbal focus that contributed to conference success. Her findings suggest that when topics were co-developed by both teacher and student, and when the student was offered more opportunities to determine topic focus or initiate topic shift, the conference outcomes carried more weight in terms of productive revision (Freedman, p. 6). She also acknowledged that praise and feedback made positive impacts, but that weaker writers received less of each; she determined that their conferences typically focused on lower-order writing concerns (usage and mechanics issues)

and that both student and teacher were complicit in this focus. Interestingly, the stronger writers found conferences more productive when their behavior matched the expectations of the teacher (p. 10). Teachers admitted that the weaker writers' semantic content and focus on errors was off-putting, leading to a facile transfer of typical classroom discourse behaviors and attitudes to the writing conference setting.

The results imply that teacher attitudes toward a student's languaging behaviors can impede student gains in communicative competence. The weaker students, both native and non-native speakers, were not "teacher-wise . . . they did not ingratiate themselves with the teacher (Freedman, 1982, p. 10). Teacher attitudes are "endemic and powerful . . . and regardless of overtly expressed attitudes, teachers are quite likely to be influenced by what they perceive as deviant speech . . . thus potentially inhibiting the students' desire to learn" (Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1982, p. 28). It seems these students were denied an opportunity to develop or exhibit their own communicative competence, which, as Cazden (1988) points out, "is demonstrated implicitly by . . . appropriate responses and initiations . . . and supported by sanctions within the social context" (p. 47). I fear we seriously underestimate the language skills students bring to the classroom and fail to "start from where they are."

Sperling (1992) has done extensive studies of writing conferences in an attempt to highlight how "talk 'rearranges' problems" (p. 3). She has analyzed these sessions using a matrix of adjacency pairs, such as pairs of questions-answers, offers-accepts, and requests-compliances (p. 10). Tagging these pairs as they are used in conferences uncovers the patterns of conferences: these patterns of interaction reflect who is doing what during the conference. "The 'steerer', not surprisingly, is invariably the teacher" (p. 10). But Sperling synthesizes her findings with other research of her own and others to posit that teacher-talk was not necessarily the only culprit in diminishing the conference goals. Indeed, Sperling found that effective 'steering' was a cooperative labor, one that was dependent on student input. Successful conferences were "highly collaborative . . . negotiations between teacher and student . . . ideas and strategies for writing [were] reflected in mutual control of both conference topic and structure (Sperling, 1990, p. 39). The unproductive conference was signified by student passivity and limited student contributions, and consequently, teachers took the reins (p. 39). Her key finding, that a "multiplicity of dyadic opportunities . . . [in classrooms] . . . feeds the collaborative effort . . ." makes a strong case for building in more occasions for student-talk (Sperling, p. 39).

The findings of Walker and Elias (1987) confirm that when teachers spent much of their time explaining, *explaining* being a major component of teacher-talk, the conference was less successful. Their work suggests that "conferences devoted to the articulation of criteria for success in writing and to evaluation of the students' work" rated much more highly (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 266). In other words, students who talked with teachers about what they needed to change or improve, and students who engaged with teachers in self-evaluation, were much more likely to revise and improve writing. "The dialogic nature of the conference allows students to express their own concerns and thereby participate more actively in the evaluation . . . [and] develop their meta-awareness of language as a generative system for thinking and formulating knowledge" (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 167). Asking students to build the criteria or agenda for the conference, and inviting their participation in self-evaluation, may be the most important components to successful conferencing. In order for these operatives to work, teacher-talk must be re-evaluated.

Newkirk recognizes that ideally a writing conference "shifts conversational and evaluative responsibility onto the student," and he echoes Sperling's (1990) findings that credit "negotiation and mutual manipulation" (Newkirk, 1995, p. 195). In a collaborative conference then, student ownership of the text should extend to student ownership of the conference. (Of course Newkirk and others have found this economic model a limiting and potentially over-

approach, rather than expanding the *ownership, authority, or banking* metaphors any further.)

What is problematic, according to Newkirk (1995), is the language of the conference itself. He found that students were handed the ball, but not the terminology needed to make the best of their "performance." Because students are rarely offered what Goffman calls "an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities" they cannot surmount the obstacles that these new performative tasks entail (cited in Gumperz, 1982, p. 48). Prior to the conference, teachers held the ball, they set the agenda, they did the evaluating. Again, the IRE pattern is the fall-back position for students ill-equipped to advance their own conference goals because they are locked into patterns they have understood tacitly as culturally appropriate behavior (Newkirk, p. 212). Newkirk does not recommend that we teach students overtly the types of language strategies that would help them gain access; however, he believes teachers can initiate role-shifting by modelling and proceed with much more patience regarding the hesitation of students to participate fully. The temptation to fill silences with teacher-talk must be resisted.

According to King (1993), "writing conferences which simply reproduce the interpersonal relationships of conventional schooling intensify teacher-centeredness, magnifying the teacher's authority and more powerfully denying the student any access to control" (p. 17). For writing conferences to be productive, teachers must give up some power in the discourse, although they certainly remain the power behind the discourse. Fairclough (1989), in *Language and Power*, reminds us that even these kinds of face-to-face encounters are invariably unequal. The nature of teaching itself is "characterized by a division of roles, such as one actor . . . [teacher] . . . assumes and is accorded authority to guide the action" (Gumperz & Herasimchuk, 1975, p. 87). Working from the assumption that this imbalance may never be eliminated completely, we should attempt to tease out the strategies of teacher-talk that can benefit students and help drive the writing conference where the student wants it to go. "How much student talk is not a key determinant of successful writing conferences"; what they talk about—the agenda—is, "especially when the focus remains on the student's work and not the teacher's agenda" (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 281). True teaching events or teachable moments can still occur, even if teacher has surrendered some comfort and complacency with power.

King (1993) is also keen to remind us that the conference implies a new an "unaccustomed role" for both teacher and student (p. 17). This becomes problematical when we fail to orient students to the role by denying them the language tools needed to negotiate the conference. We often withhold the tools if we do too much telling or even too much asking. Gaining an awareness of our teacher-talk strategies and making a shift is "a difficult problem for those of us who have been trained to exert authority by assuming ownership of the student's text" (Fletcher, 1993, p. 41).

One approach that is being re-developed to specifically contribute to writing conference strategies is the counselor-client style of interaction. In this Rogerian model, effective components of counseling relationships are transferred to writing conference settings. The elements of trust-building, client empowerment or enabling, and non-didactic means of guidance are key to both conferencing and counseling (Taylor, 1993, p. 26). This "helper relationship" can increase student confidence when teachers understand that quality listening is productive and therapeutic (p. 30).

Bakhtin asserted that "idea systems exist as a relation between speaker and listener" (qtd. in Gere, 1987, p. 87). The idea system of the writing conference relies on this relationship. But this relationship is by no means free of interferences or conflict from either direction, as Bakhtin states:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (qtd. in Cazden, 1992, p. 198)



What we need to explore, based on the studies described above, is how re-defining our teaching and learning roles within conferences can enhance conference dialogue and contribute to student growth through communicative competence.

### Conclusion

I am not certain how good a judge I can be of my own conferencing strategies, but I have observed how both tutors and teachers have rushed to fill gaps, dominated conferences with teacher-talk, and "steered" conferences to meet goals that were not negotiated or shared by the student. I believe the strength and value of conferencing still comes from asking questions (although I am gaining new understandings of this strategy), waiting patiently for answers, inserting verbal nudges, and probing rather than testing. The flavor of these conferences may seem more open-ended than some described by sociolinguists as speech events, events which are more bounded and clearly start and finish.

I see the participants in speech events or conversations engaged in what Oakeshott (1959) calls an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (qtd. in Peterson, 1992, p. 50). This simple definition happens to neatly address the most integral components of the writing conference. There is a sense of unrehearsed spontaneity, even if the conference is scheduled; there are unstated goals of intellectual stimulation, learning, and "showing the knowing;" and there is often no way to predict outcomes or provide closure.

The writing conference--a private dyad within a larger speech community, made up of teacher and student sharing--is a special, natural, necessary and productive supplement to classroom teaching. Graves (1983) states that "conferences have a cumulative effect on the writer" (p. 142), one that can be nurturing, productive, confidence-building and even fun. Unfortunately, "the writing conference is not accepted as a central part of the curriculum for most teachers" (Barker, qtd. in Flynn & King, 1993, p. 4). I believe that some of the tangential benefits of conferencing have not yet been effectively transmitted to teachers through composition specialists or sociolinguists. Certainly there is the need for more classroom research, ideally initiated by teacher-ethnographers. "If sociolinguists are right, we cannot fully understand classroom language without understanding the ways it is perceived by the classroom participants, for it is these perceptions that guide their behavior" (Morine-Darshimer, 1980, p. 101). Discerning the sociolinguistic features of conferences, through ethnographic strategies that invite students to become co-researchers, can contribute to communicative competence, strengthen student confidence, prompt socio-cognitive shifts in learning strategies, contribute to a socially-constructed learning environment, and place more value on oral sharing and oral forms of evaluation.

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